

Link between virility and status in american literature

[Entertainment](#), [Theatre](#)



“ Both Albee and Williams use their male characters to explore a link between virility and status in both ‘ AStreetcar named Desire’ and ‘ Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf’. ” Showing appreciation of context and with close analysis of structure, form and language, consider to what extent you agree with this assertion. Through male characters’ Albee and Williams, assess the links between virility and status by analysing behaviour and their interaction with same-sex and female characters. The play Wright’s use of structure, form and language exposes the link between a character’s status and their virility.

Set in 1940s America, Streetcar portrays men who use their virile nature to increase their status, whereas in Woolf, set in the early 1960s, George portrays a man with a damaged status from his weakened virility, demonstrating the evident link connecting status and virility. Through structure, form and language Albee and Williams give clear evidence of the links between virility and status. From analysis with same sex and female characters the men in the plays can portray the insufficiencies of a man lacking status or virility.

In Streetcar, set in 1940s America men are portrayed using their virile natures to increase their status, and in Woolf, set in the early 1960s Albee uses the male characters to demonstrate the closeness of virility and status as characteristics. Allowing both plays to show effectively that neither virility nor status exists without the other. From analysis, both playwrights suggest that the male characters, by sexually dominating women, acquire a degree

of personal status. The rape scene in *Streetcar* allows Stanley to prove himself sexually powerful through his rage and strength.

This establishes him as 'King' of his territory, as he overpowers Blanche. ' Since earliest manhood... his life has been the pleasure with women... giving and taking of it...

with power and pride'; it is a power he can achieve over women that they cannot over him. ' Let's have some rough house! [He springs towards her, overturning the table. She cries out... he picks up her inert figure... carries her to the bed]'. These stage directions portray Blanche's passivity, and give the audience a better understanding of how the event empowers Stanley and Blanche's broken line, ' Don't you come towards me another step or I'll-', intensifies her lack of power comparatively with Stanley's.

Similarly, Albee shows men's power through their ability to overpower; George asserts ' I'd take you by force, right here on the living room rug'. It is telling that at the end of the play he takes Martha to bed, after destroying her fantasy child. Albee in addition uses sexuality as a battle tool; Martha says ' I was necking with one of the guests' in an attempt to antagonise her husband yet his insouciance response undermines her quest for power, '... Good..

. Good you go right on'. Women appeared to submit to the power of men; even Blanche admits that maybe Stanley is what they need to ' Mix with [their] blood'. This power is not only determined through sexuality but also through presence. Williams uses the men's clothing to portray power, in

contrast to Blanche's delicate 'white' clothing. [Stanley, Steve, Mitch, and Pablo wear colored shirts, solid blues, ..

. a purple, a red-and-white-check, a light green, and they are men at the peak of their physical manhood, as coarse and direct and powerful as the primary colors]'. This description presents the image of men as vivid and virile. Both playwrights suggest that both physical and sexual dominance over women leads to an improvement in the perception and status of the male characters. George's power over Martha is not evident until the end of the play when he 'kills' their child. George says 'there was a car accident..

. he's dead. POUF!' Which is followed by Martha's reply '(A howl... weakens into a moan) NOOOOOOoooooo'. In killing their son, he kills the illusion that gives Martha her maternal role and he gains power after Martha's fling with Nick, 'while the... two of you were out of the room.

.. I mean, I don't know where'. Similarly, he regains a position of control after Martha soiled his role as a father, 'a son who was so ashamed of his father he asked me... [If] he was not our child; who could not tolerate the shabby failings [of] his father.

At the end of the play, her submission and simple sentences demonstrate the emotional effect he has over her. She asks 'You had to?' and he curtly replies 'yes' ending the conversation, showing her compliance. Therefore, he wins the battle for status in the marriage and restores his virility as he takes her to 'bed', showing the link between virility and status in the play. Society's values are ingrained into Stella and Martha subconsciously or

consciously; they both follow the lead of their husbands and conform to expectations. Honey tries to transform herself to become what society expects, a mother and a supportive wife. She follows her husband to the University and fights her fear of pregnancy to meet these expectations. These expectations in the plays that the women conform to, show how the men's desire for status and power affect their female counterparts.

Harold Bloom explains that ' we all desire power and control... [but] power and knowledge can corrupt and deform'. The household's of the central characters in the plays illustrate the link between virility and status. In *Streetcar*, as Stanley is the main male character and his flat is central in the play it reinforces his assertion that he ' thinks of his small apartment as his kingdom', showing his status in the play and the matched virility we expect. At the beginning of the play Stella greets the symbolically meat-bearing Stanley with ' breathless' excitement, '[Calling after him] Stanley! Where are you going? (Stanley)Bowling! (Stella)Can I come watch? ' Stella follows Stanley and watches him bowl, and in this way, she lives through him.

He has control as demonstrated at the poker night. He controls the game and music, even though it is Stella's home as well. He directs the events and says ' play at my place... but you bring the beer'. Before the game was set at Stanley's, the game could have taken place at Mitch's home; however, Mitch says ' Not at my place my mother's still sick' setting a contrast between the two male characters.

Stanley asserts his authority during the game when Blanche ignores his order to turn the music off by throwing the radio out of the window, a clear demonstration of his power and desire for control. This scene in the play reflects strongly the link between virility and status and the desire for them to develop from the characters. Stanley and Mitch's relationship demonstrates Williams' deliberate contrasting of male characters. Stanley has a pregnant wife and sexual encounters outside of wedlock, whereas Mitch is alone with his dying mother. Williams portrays Mitch as lacking status among his peers partly because of his perceived lack of virility. His politeness, reserve and respect for women make him subject to ridicule from others. QUOTE.

His abortive attempt to rape Blanche is a demonstration of him lacking masculinity; ' He... is unable to rape her, leaving the job to the more manly Stanley'. Mitch is described as a ' dancing bear', admired as entertainment rather than powerful and sensual. Williams uses his lack of virility to portray the power a virile man has over one that lacks virility, and how virility reflects status in the play. The households are dependent upon the professions of the male characters in the plays, which reflect their social positions. The contextual setting in *Streetcar* reflects the mass unemployment in America due to the depression. In the 1930s and 1940s, unemployment reached an overall peak of 23.6% and the rate of poverty was above 40%; these figures illustrate the status one had in having a profession and being able to provide his family.

For example, Stanley works with Mitch but he has the power within the pair, perhaps because he is 'the only one in his crowd that's likely to get anywhere'. Stella explains that 'it's the drive he has' as "a man has been brought up to look at money as a sign of his virility, a symbol of his power", and this exactly what Stanley wants. His professional success reflects the effect he has on his wife. Stella explains 'when he is away... I nearly go wild!' His job gives him control and a status over his friends who defer to him as he has a greater responsibility.

Likewise, in Woolf we see women falling behind men. Martha appears disconcerted that she cannot be the son her father always wanted, and therefore expects her husband to achieve her aims whilst making a name for them. Martha describes George as 'an old bog in the History Department', showing that she feels let down by her situation and yet, powerless to improve it as 'Georgie boy didn't have the stuff'. In Woolf, the relationship between George and Martha's father is competitive, with George appearing weaker by comparison. George and Martha are locked in a childless marriage; he also has little status in the University, and therefore little power. In comparison, Martha's father controls the whole establishment (he has a daughter) and George remarks how 'musical beds is the faculty sport', suggesting Martha's father dominates George in multiple ways. Furthermore, George studies History and the characters 'collectively suggest how modern society worships technology and science' which explains the appeal of Nick to Martha, and her dissatisfaction with George.

Nick demonstrates the appeal of power and knowledge as he is a man who is about to make history instead of teach it. He is on the forefront of an exciting new scientific development; providing the appeal of progression and desire for power that intoxicates Martha. Albee uses the pair's fling to show the links between virility and power, and the desire they create. In both play scripts, animalism is a common literary device used to degrade characters or to portray brute masculinity. In Woolf, George explains 'women are like geese, they hiss...

like geese'. This imagery of women suggests men's superiority and women's lack of individuality, whilst the sibilance highlights their vindictiveness. Comparatively, Nick says 'mount her like a god damn dog' to George, highlighting his brute sexuality. The animalism of men and women reflect geese hunting in America, reflecting women's position in the contextual period as having less power, and symbolises men as dominant predators. Martha and George effectively degrade one another by using animalism, '[Martha] foams at the mouth', making her appear as a diseased dog and furthermore, description such as 'hyena', 'sub-human monster howling' and 'oink! Oink!' show the way animalism degrades the women in the play. Animalism in Streetcar portrays danger and protection and is a reflection of raw desire instead of a battle tool. Blanche and Stanley's relationship is tense, she calls him 'ape-like', 'primitive' and 'animal thing', but she also recognises that his animalism masculinities him and she flirtatiously tells him that her sister has married a 'man'.

Furthermore, his animalistic protection of Stella is attractive as their ' low, animal moans', is suggestive of their compatibility and reciprocated sexuality. Both Albee and Williams use their male characters to explore a link between virility and status in the plays. The Oxford Dictionary defines virility as a male " having strength, energy and a strong sex drive. " In both of the plays, the male characters that are defined by this definition are represented as having a higher status.